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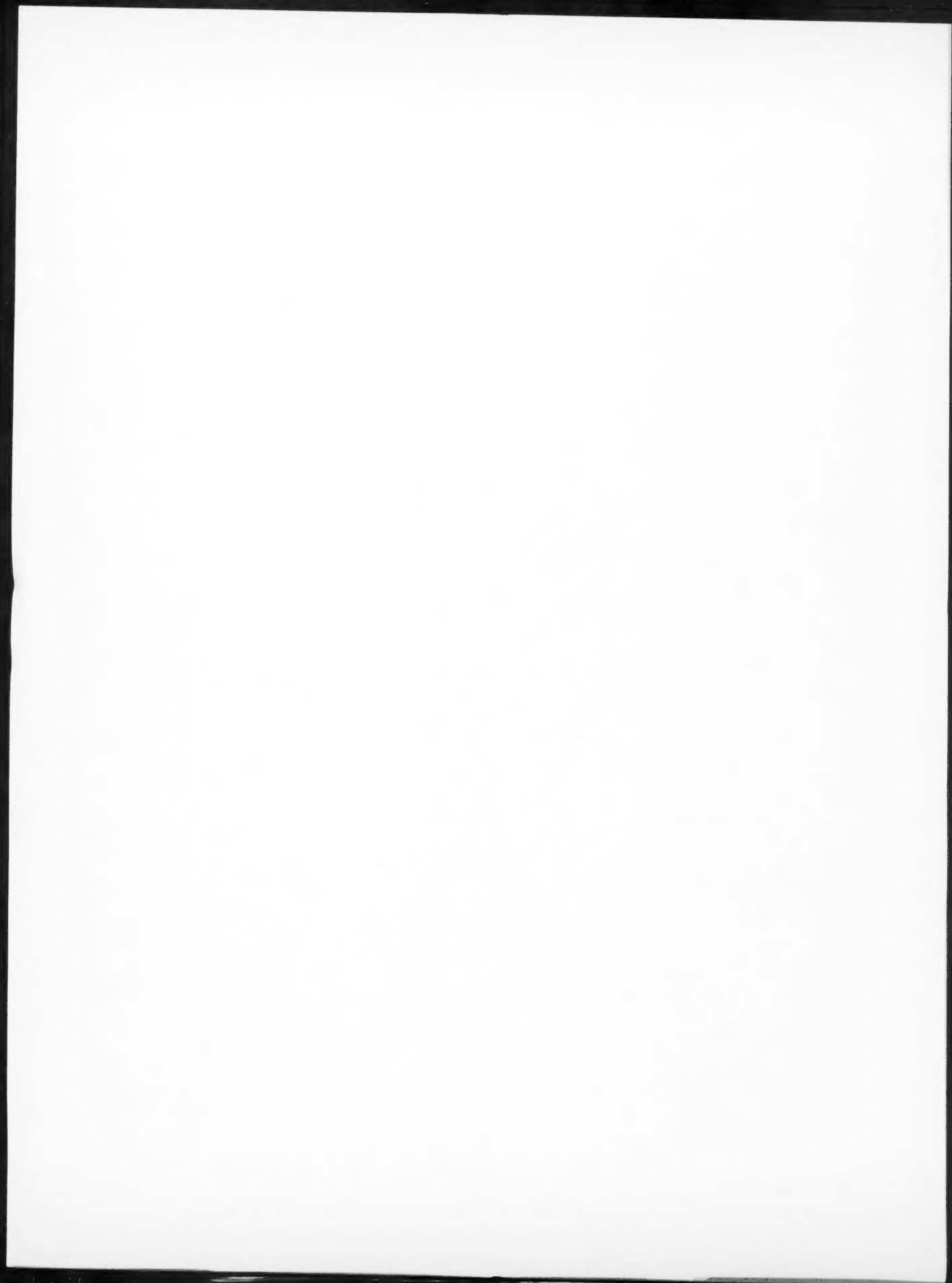
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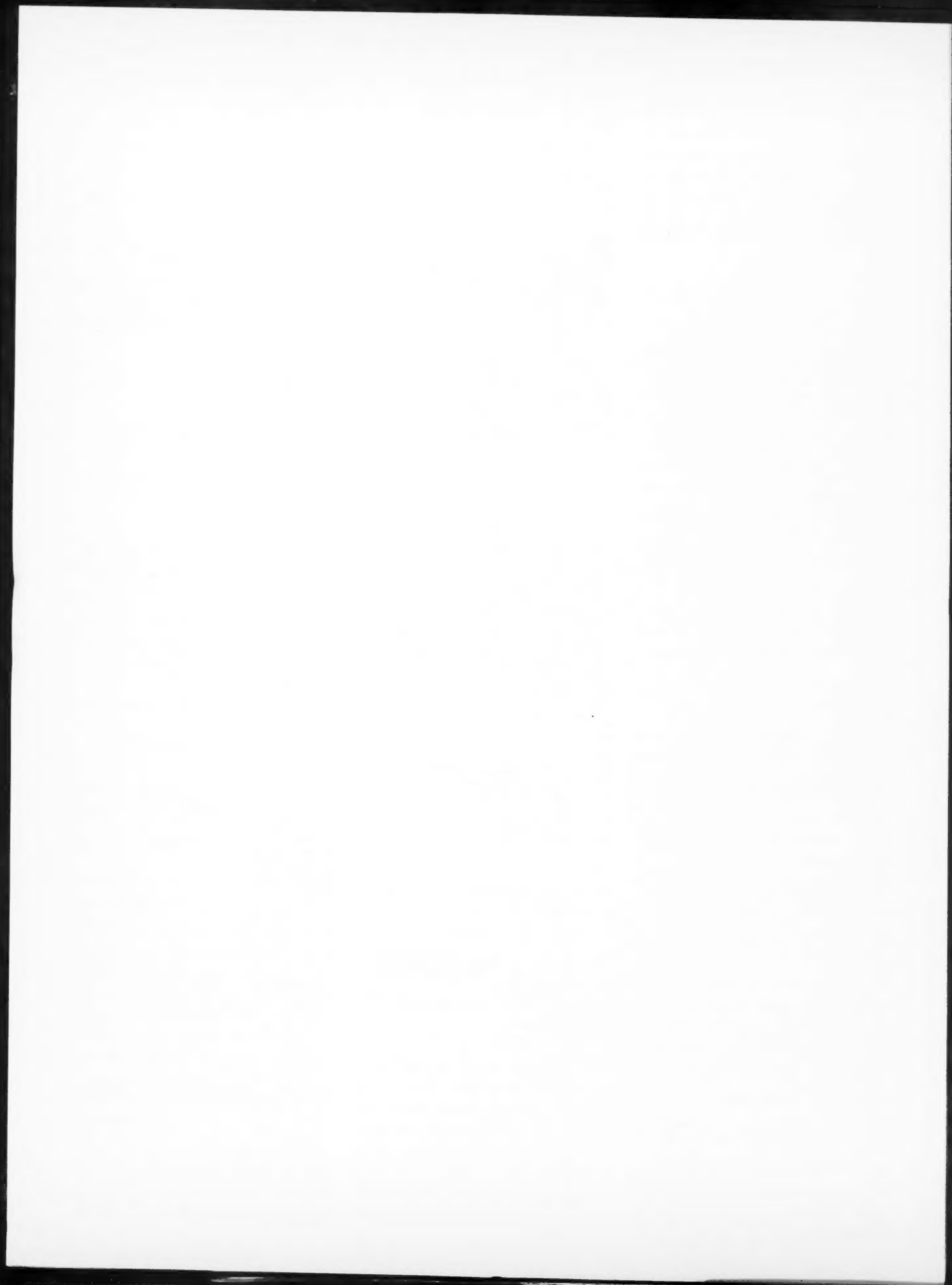
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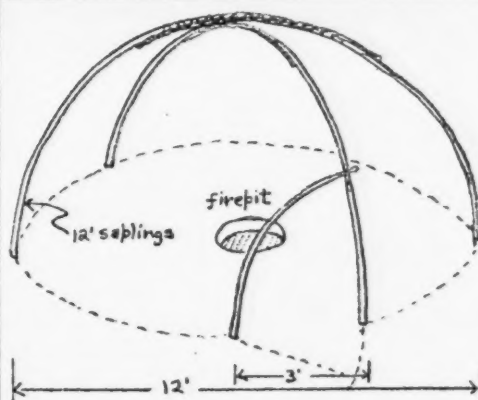
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If you're not quite ready for a true sauna, here's an inexpensive way to get a feel for the real thing.

The \$5 Thermal Experience

William C. Starkweather

THE INDIANS INVENTED the steam house and the communards rediscovered it. Why the joys of this simple experience remained relatively unknown during all those intervening years is something of a mystery—perhaps the advent of an inexpensive and translucent material with some of the heat-holding properties of the Indians' hides made it possible again. For just a few dollars and several hours labor, anyone can enjoy the unique sensations of an Indian steam bath. Its heat is less extreme than a sauna's, but the humidity increases its effectiveness in warming and soothing the body and, along the way perhaps, the psyche. Alternating the periods of heating with cooling in a stream or pond, snow, shower, or just cool air produces a unique feeling of physical relaxation and well-being.

To build the steam tent, a circle 12 feet in diameter is leveled and a shallow central pit 2 feet across is prepared. An edging strip of metal around the pit is an optional refinement to contain the stones that will be heated. Four 12-foot saplings, evenly spaced, are implanted on the perimeter of the circle. Opposing pairs of these are then bent together to form two arches, which are lashed together with rope. A shorter single sapling is set 3 feet from one of the arch bases and bent over to it to form a portal. The entire dome thus created is covered with a 20- by 20-foot sheet of 6 mil polyethylene clear plastic. The plastic is folded to fit the dome and held in shape with aluminum duct tape, best located along the arches. Staples through this tape into the arches hold the tent skin secure. Lastly, sods, sand, logs, or rocks are posi-

tioned to hold the poly down around the dome's perimeter except at the doorway. A stick weight can be attached to the bottom of the door flap, for ease in opening and to hold it closed.

It takes about three hours to heat the stones that provide the heat source for the steam tent. Smooth, large, fine-grained stones work best, although even these will split and crack after several uses. A large bonfire is built with the stones laced into the lower layers. When many of the rocks have been brought to a dull red glow, they are removed with a shovel, loaded into a wheelbarrow or a pail on a sling, and dumped into the firepit in the dome.

Bathers may initially enjoy the dry heat generated in the tent by the stones alone, but soon dippers of water are sprinkled on the stones and steam fills the chamber. At 135°F, which is about the maximum temperature, chanting together may distract the mind so that the bones themselves may come to feel the warmth. Occasional herb- or lemon-scented water on the stones is pleasant. Additional stones may be carried in as a second or third heating is enjoyed.

A tent like this will last several seasons, or it can be erected in a few hours at a camping site for a shorter period of use. The steam bath is an outdoor body-experience that can be enjoyed throughout the year, with each season contributing its particular combination of sensations. ♦

WILLIAM STARKWEATHER has been an administrator at the University of Massachusetts for the past twenty years. He and his family enjoy a sauna that they built themselves four years ago.

